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ABSTRACT

This paper presents ways to transform leadership by transforming leaders. It advocates an increased knowledge about self and a deeper connection with the purpose for living. It outlines the spiritual condition of school leaders and the importance of spiritual development. This increased spirituality is fostered by developing an awareness of spiritual influences, by assessing spiritual conditions, and by strengthening spiritual intelligence. The article offers tips for reconnecting the spirit with the work of teaching, such as reconnecting faculty with the feelings of power and spiritual joy that brought them to teaching and learning to begin with. It details four lessons for achieving renewed leadership, advocating letting go and moving toward the inner edge by identifying spiritual obstacles, such as grudges and negative feelings, and eliminating them. Leading authentically by sharpening the self-image, personality type, interpersonal needs, conflict styles, learning styles, change styles, and the ways that values are prioritized are all discussed. Leaders should hold an empowering inner mission in which they recognize the need to join together for a common purpose, where each person believes in the school's mission. Finally, a spirit of community can be developed when all staff members join together and engage in team-building activities. (RJM)

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GIVING SCHOOL LEADERS THE INNER EDGE

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On a sunny June morning in 1995, the entire staff of Jesse Wharton Elementary School expectantly waited to begin a leadership development program. Their school was known as a low-achieving school housed in a neglected building. Their students came from poor families, many with limited English. This had been a particularly discouraging year. Students hadn't scored well on statewide tests and if test scores didn't improve, the school might be taken over by the state. The new principal, Pandora Bell, was worried but hopeful. Recently local land developers began building expensive lakeside homes nearby. The demoralized school didn't match their vision of an idyllic, upbeat school community, and they realized that the sight and spirit of the school could wreck plans to market homes to families with school-age children. First, the developer considered opening a private school to serve the new community. However, a former school board member, Betty Smith, convinced them to raise funds to improve the existing school. Some months later, she contacted the Center for Creative Leadership and asked them to design a leadership development program for the faculty and staff..

Outer Edges and the "Inner Edge"

Traditional leadership development programs for educators too often focus on teaching skills for leading in the external world (Palmer, 1990). Topics include "how tos": how to delegate, plan, run a meeting, manage change, and supervise and motivate others. One assumption driving these programs is that increased knowledge *about* leading creates better school leaders. This focus on developing cognitive understandings of

the external world and solving problems "out there" leaves systems of schooling intact and everyone frustrated. Private schools, charter schools, fresh approaches to curriculum, longer school years, school uniforms, "wired" classrooms, new standards and assessments can give school communities an "outer edge" - doing things differently can change some results.

But truly transforming education so that *all* students can live and work successfully requires educators to cultivate an "inner edge," too. The required transformative change means not just changes in "doing," but changes in "being." This inner edge comes from people relating differently with themselves and with each other. It requires a deeper knowledge about self and a deeper connection with their purpose for living. It means being mission-driven, rather than "having" a mission. It means working as vigorously inside themselves as they do on the outside, material world of schooling . It means acknowledging that the unseen spirit that builds bridges with the self and with others can not be ignored.

Recent publications indicate a growing awareness that leadership now requires something more than content expertise. Books with titles like "Jesus CEO," (1995), "Leading With Soul," (Bolman and Deal, 1995), and "Spirit At Work" (Conger, 1994) reveal a remarkable interest in the topic of spirituality in the workplace. Some see personal and spiritual development as being synonymous with leadership development (Vaill, 1989; CCL, 1998). Yet in most leadership programs for educators, this topic is taboo. Issues of spirit that bring educators either closer together or farther apart in

their work with children usually remain "undiscussables," and the important work of developing a spiritual inner edge is left to chance.

Connecting Conversations: The Spiritual Condition of School Leaders

Conversations with Jesse Wharton faculty revealed that their leadership program had to be different. Most of them had forgotten their successes. Conversations were tinged with cynicism, and they kept themselves going by repeating excuses for poor student achievement. They were deeply discouraged. They needed to reconnect with the spiritual direction that led them to teaching and with the power of their own spirit to impact the lives of students. They needed an "inner edge."

An inner edge comes from spiritual development. Yet addressing "spiritual" matters in public schools is often confused with addressing religious matters, and this causes discomfort. Although religion and spirituality always have been tightly interwoven, spiritual experiences - life-driving purpose, meaning and valuing, deep connections to the larger world - transcend religions and can be a legitimate part of professional dialogue in the public school arena (Conger, 1996). The core of these spiritual experiences - a profound, life-driving sense of purpose, meaning, and valuing unique to each person - can come from either a supernatural *or* secular source. Jesse Wharton's faculty focused on these universal spiritual experiences.

Developing a spiritual inner edge can't be done by learning formulas for living right or well (Palmer, 1998). Instead, it means stripping away illusions of powerlessness and coming to understand that each person creates much of the reality she or he lives. It means letting go, and giving up defeatist self-fulfilling prophecies. It means embracing a proactive stance and believing in the awesome power of unseen spirit. This can be frightening because it means adopting a "no excuses," fully responsible life style.

Spiritual development, like physical and cognitive development, doesn't just happen. Heightened spiritual efficacy requires actively developing three capacities:

1. *Awareness of Spirit Influence.* Awareness of spirit influence involves recognizing that matter is *not* the fundamental factor in the movement of history: spirit is, consciousness is (Palmer, 1998). It is the understanding that spirit is more powerful than economics, that deep spiritual sources of power within people moves boulders and creates change in the world - and in school communities.
2. *Assessment of Spiritual Conditions*. Spiritual Condition is the feeling a person has about the fundamental meaning of who they are, what they are doing, and the contributions they are making to their world (Vaill, 1989). It is characterized by a personal awareness - appraisal -realignment process that keeps all actions authentic and true to self.
3. *Strengthening Spiritual Intelligence.* Strengthening spiritual intelligence involves heightening the ability to sense the presence and movement of spirit in the school community and to work constructively with that spirit (Pearson, 1998). It is

characterized by a deep knowing that school life results from a complex interaction of spirit and material world, of what is "out there" with what is inside each individual (Palmer, 1998).

Conversations tinged with negativity indicate a spiritual hunger (Sardello, 1995). This spiritual hunger leaves teachers and principals detached, uninspired, impatient, and able only to connect weakly with their students and the rest of the school community. Leading spiritual development becomes an important leader responsibility.

Reconnecting Spirit With The Work Of Teaching

They bent over networked lap-top computers, deeply absorbed in a sacred task - telling stories of their spirits in action. The facilitators asked them to remember and share stories of former students who had been positively impacted by their presence and action. They recorded "those moments when you know <u>you</u> made a difference in a student's life."

Diane Henry, a teacher, remembered 7 year old Becky, whose mother warned of her "fits." She remembered how her patience transformed her into a sweet child. Della Vernon, a teacher aide, remembered the joy she felt when something she said or did made the "light bulb click on" for a student. Pandora Bell wrote of Linn, an angry, biting five year old boy. She visited his home, worked with his parents and knew that this extra care helped him enter fourth grade, doing "very well." Ed Wilson, the custodian,

grew up in three foster homes, a poor orphan. His story was about kids like him that he talked to and encouraged while he was cleaning up the school. He knew he made them feel better about themselves.

Nearly forgotten stories of students touched by their caring and teaching filled the computers. At the end of the hour of storytelling, facilitators harvested stories from the laptops , photographed the authors writing, and printed them into a book entitled: "Stories from the Heart." That afternoon, everyone read aloud from this book. The room and the people seemed lighter and, for the first time, a "can do" attitude seemed to fill the room.

Discouragement is a major barrier to the restructuring of any school community. When leaders and followers stop believing in themselves, they stop trying, and content and process-based staff development alone can not change this dynamic. This is a spiritual condition which must be felt and faced: going into it and through it is the only way out.

So how does a leader start this journey? One way is by reconnecting faculty with the feelings of power, the spiritual joy that brought them to teaching and learning in the first place. In this instance, telling stories about high points in their lives as educators provided the bridge to pools of lost energy. Producing the book with all of their stories provided a tangible affirmation of the positive energy contained in past experiences that was still available for present action. Confronting them with evidence of their efficacy and personal power was revitalizing.

Is there spiritual hunger in your building? Ask these questions and notice the answers.

- Who is discouraged? Who is embued with extra energy and drive?
- Who is disconnected from the group? Who creates community?
- Who transmits apathy? Who fosters vision and vitality?
- Who is judgmental? Who easily lets go of hurts?

Engaging faculty and staff in role-plays and simulations designed to uncover hidden issues of mistrust and conflict causes dialogue about the spiritual state of a school community. Videotaping and analyzing faculty discussions for evidence of negative words and body language is another way to help faculty and staff become aware of their spiritual condition. Storytelling, too, provides insight into how people view themselves and their world. One powerful exercise starts with the following prompt:

> "Write a fairy tale. Do not use real names. The story should have a beginning, middle, and end and a hero who struggles with some issue. The final paragraph should tell how the issue is resolved. Write <u>continuously</u> for one hour. Do not edit, or censor your thoughts. When you are finished, you will be given five minutes to cross out any extraneous material. Then, you will be asked to read your story to the group."

Through group discussion of story themes, the storytellers can see how they and their colleagues experience the world. This can lead to new choices about their personal and collective spiritual life.

During the time Jesse Wharton Elementary School staff spent at the Center, they experienced many of these activities and left lessons about spirit leadership development with the Center staff. These lessons follow.

Lesson One: Let Go: Moving Toward The Inner Edge

They watched Marian Wright Edelman's video, "Prayer for Children," and then discussed the spiritual obstacles to caring for and educating their students. Were any grudges blocking faculty collaboration? Were people holding on to past hurts? Were they willing to give up these negative feelings to improve outcomes for kids?

Facilitators put slips of paper on each table and asked participants to write down all negative thoughts they held deep inside themselves about their colleagues. One by one, they deposited the slips of paper into a pot in the middle of the room. Everyone then walked outside and circled the paper-filled pot. As a match turned the papers into ashes, the facilitator urged the staff to let go of all the negativity represented on those slips of paper - for the sake of the kids. Hugging, hand-shaking, and tears marked a renewed sense of spirit and commitment to their "higher purpose" - the children.

This faculty and staff, like many, had worked together for a long time, and had accumulated hurt feelings. The blame game - blaming each other, parents, and students - was popular. This created two barriers to spiritual growth: a cold distancing that kept people from working together, and an energy drain that sapped the group's vitality. Before any positive spiritual energy could enter, negative energy had to exit. They would have to choose their purpose - the education of kids - over their need to be right and nurse old wounds.

Lesson Two: Lead Authentically

A reporter asked the school's principal,, "What was it like going through this kind of leadership development program?" With a smile, she said, "having an upper and lower G.I. at the same time!"

Spiritual development continues with a frank assessment of each person's spiritual condition. Each faculty and staff member must face and answer for themselves hard questions:

- Why am I on this earth? How does that relate to my life at school?
- Who am I? What do I value? What is my personality? How is my unreflected self likely to behave?
- How do I perceive others and how do they see me?
- What are my taken-for-granted assumptions about myself, my colleagues, the students, the community?

- How does my "self" help the school achieve its mission? How does it get in the way?

A variety of tools and processes can help individuals sharpen their self-image. The Jesse Wharton staff used formal assessments to tell them about their personality type, their interpersonal needs, their conflict style, their learning style, their change style, and the way they prioritized their values. The also received feedback on how they were perceived by others - their boss, their peers, and those reporting to them using a "360 assessment." They watched videos of themselves to further understand how they responded under pressure and in conflicted situations. From this intensive reflective process came a deep understanding of the greatest instrument each person has - the "self."

Lesson Three: Hold An Empowering Inner Mission

The staff recognized a need to join together for a common purpose. How could all of the ideals each held in their hearts come together for the good of students? Their old mission statement seemed hollow. They decided to write a new one - one that each of them could support with all of their being. Each word became a "heart" word.

Leaders who are unclear about their "line in the sand values" may "have" a mission, but it won't be one they "hold." The words of the mission statement will sound hollow, abstract, or dreamlike. But when the mission comes from inside, people are compelled to act. They creates mission statements springing from the heart and soul, not just the

head. "Site-based" management and "empowered" faculties are not created by proclamation or by removing bureaucratic barriers. Empowerment results from each individual's firm belief in their mission and in their ability to make it happen.

Lesson Four: A Spirit Of Community

Every staff member - principal, teachers, counselors, cafeteria workers, janitors, and teacher aides - attended the leadership program together. Team-building activities helped them feel the power of the collective self. They called themselves "The Learning Circle" and it grew to include university and business partners. Trusting and caring for each other provided strength for the changes they knew they needed to make. An unseen bond pulled them closer together.

People are hungry for a spirit of community. The old sources of community - extended family, church, civic organizations - don't work as well as they used to because of geographic distance and time constraints (Vaill, 1989). People look to their workplace to fill a need for connectedness. When intense community spirit exists in schools, no change project is too great, no student too difficult. This sense of connectedness enables ordinary educators to do extraordinary things. When people reach across boundaries, confront superficial unity, and create authentic unity, a powerful synergy results (Terry,1993).

Highly structured team-building exercises are an effective vehicle for helping groups experience a state of communion with others. Through several such activities, Jesse Wharton faculty developed a strong "inner edge." With this spirit of community flowing freely and powerfully, they began coping with the loss of continuity and continuous change they faced at school, and they tackled the tough work of learning new ways of teaching and learning.

CONCLUSION

Slowly, hope replaced cynicism at the Jesse Wharton school. A deepening faith in their own abilities took hold and faculty and staff refused to accept less than the best for all of their students. By the end of three years, people spoke of a "Jesse Wharton miracle". Student achievement scores soared and the school sat in the top tier of statewide "ABC" tests. The school won the Governor's Entrepreneurial Award for Excellence, and its principal was named Principal of the Year. Faculty and staff speak at national conferences about their success. Finally, the Joseph M. Bryan Foundation and the Center for Creative Leadership provided significant financial support to replicate the program in twenty-one other schools. The inner edge of spirit leadership has spread to other schools in the community.